

A Nikosthenic (?) vase from the Costa Cabral collection

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1. Collectionism and the taste for Greek vases

The often individual effort of valuing heritage, both at the level of the isolated object and of large public art and buildings, has a quite strong tradition in Western history. Motivations were always distinct, ranging from a sort of selfless evergetism to the political use of restoration, and to the private pleasure of owning and handling parts of a more or less distant past. In this field, Classical Antiquity itself is no exception, and has always been the target of a prolific collecting activity. True antiquarian circuits are registered in ancient Rome, for example in the handling of papyri, statues or furniture (Martial even describes something resembling an antiques market)¹. An important part of this fascination had to do first and foremost with the construction of a collective memory, which can be seen very well in the field of publicly exposed ancient *spolia opima*, one of the multiple reflections of elite competition amidst a senatorial clique².

Transposing this very thought to the Portuguese Renaissance, the political exploitation that underlies the energetic epigraphic activity of André de Resende is all too evident, as is the case with the similar intellectual interests of Friar Manuel do Cenáculo, both pioneers of

¹ Cf. Holleran 2012, 248-254.

² Rutledge 2012, 123-125.

a particular scenario in Portugal that would end in an environment that somehow inspired other European courts³. Notwithstanding the obvious meaning of the term, collecting took on different importances until today, currently posing serious problems of legal, moral and ethical order regarding commercial treatment of ancient art. Also without introducing useless value judgments in this reasoning, it should be noted that very particularly in relation to Greek vases, collecting continues to receive a high relevance among us⁴, of which often no echo is found in mainstream circuits.

The enthusiasm of figures such as the Duke of Palmela, the Marquis of Sousa Holstein or the Marquis of Tomar (Costa Cabral), aristocratic figures who were actively engaged in the Portuguese political process during the 19th century, originated rich private collections, some of which were donated to museums, or ceded to temporary exhibitions, thus well known and preserved until the present day.

2. A summary on Greek vases in Portugal

Beyond its intrinsic potentialities as manufactured objects, the uniqueness of Greek pottery is that of representing, more intensely than other productions, a strong vehicle of cultural transmission⁵, by stressing not only a high archaeological but also an aesthetic and artistic value. There are hundreds of such items found throughout the Mediterranean, and beyond – for example, along the Atlantic: in Portugal, Greek fragments are found at the larger rivers, even far away from the estuaries (see map). Besides its presence in settlements of clear eastern Mediterranean nature, the findings show that transport is also made to the interior through those same rivers⁶. The presence of a trademark, a price and a craftsman's name on many of the items suggests commerce, orders and sales. However, there is uncertainty

³ Brigola 2009, 5-6.

⁴ Pereira *et al.*, 2008, 52.

⁵ Alarcão *et al.*, 2007, 18.

⁶ Pereira 2007, 10.

regarding the vessel transporters themselves, i.e., little is known about the behaviour of intermediaries, both regarding routes and loads. In any case, one cannot underestimate the impact of these materials, and the meaning that was given to them within the several indigenous communities.

As for the historical and stylistic developments of Greek vases, it is important to indicate that there are linguistic contributions involved, aspects of everyday life and culture, as well as mythological figurations. The entire range of vessels, satisfying different requirements, is thus varying in size and shape, depending on their function. On the one hand, there is a group destined for the preservation and transportation of liquids, such as the amphora, the *pelike*, the *stamnos*, or the *hydria*. In the formal group associable to banquets one distinguishes the krater (for mixing water and wine) from the *psykter* (contained ice for cooling), and the bowls, *kantharos*, *skyphos*, and *oinochoe* (in which the wine was poured). Other vessels were used for further purposes such as the *alabastron* and the *aryballos* (containing perfumes and fragrances), the *lekythos* (with oils for anointment or funerary offerings), the *aphiale* (for libations), the *lekanion* or *pyxis* (to store jewellery, cosmetics, toiletries and ointments) or larger vases for bathing water, as is the case with the *loutrophoros* or *lebes gamikos* (for bridal preparations⁷). The styles have evolved in conjunction with the production technology, which, in turn, is a declination of ancient Greece's very history, highlighting periods of expanding trade and contacts between regions, with a great interest, namely for the very archaic and orientalisating styles⁸.

In some later sources, individualized painters appear, associated with some particular feature: Polygnotus is credited for the suggestion of emotion and representation of space, and Agatharcos of Athens for the onset of perspective; Apollodorus would have invented the shading and use of mixed colours, and Zeuxis the principles of light and shade,

⁷ Pereira 2007, 9-10.

⁸ Morais 2011, 49 f.

while Parrhasius became known by the subtlety of his line⁹. It is thus possible to identify different styles, certain workshops and perhaps some painters.

Hundreds of pieces with attribution of authorship still follow the Morelli method, by Sir John Beazley. Some painters signed their work: the word “painted” could be written before a name, or sometimes the potter used the verb “made” or “modelled”. In cases of anonymity, the vase is conventionally termed “the painter of”, followed by the name of the potter, as is the case of the celebrated painter Brygos, among others. If none of these processes applies, other solutions are to be used, the most common consisting of assigning the name of the finding place of a more famous vessel (e.g. “the painter of Lisbon” – so identified by Maria Helena da Rocha Pereira and a key contribution to the study of Greek vases in Portugal), of a theme that seems to have been preferential (“the painter of swings”), or the particularities of a style (the “red line painter”). Additional alternative classifications are based on a special treatment of a myth (“the painter of Achilles”) or simply on the name of a collector (e.g. Coghill), among other solutions.

Within the Corinthian style, which is unique, new and refined – with decoration and figurines of oriental influences, emerges the application of a new technique, with black figures¹⁰. The resumption of Athenian hegemony, which starts at the beginning of the 6th century BC, coincides with the main productions of Attic black-figure decoration. They were drawn in profile but with eyes in a frontal position. Besides black, incisions are used and sometimes also reddish, purple and white traces (especially in the visible part of the female figures). The decorations with floral motifs acquire a secondary yet complementary function, since it is the representation of myths that plays a central role. Already during the 5th century BC, along with the black figures vessels that continue to be produced, especially in the case of traditional forms, such as the panathenaic amphoras, the new technique of reversed, red figures is introduced, possibly by the painter

⁹ Pereira 2007, 11-12.

¹⁰ *Id., ibid.*, 16-17

Andokides¹¹. Other authors also suggest Psiax or Nikosthenes¹², whose production is discussed below. It is interesting to mention that, in opposition to the decline of this technique since the final years of the 5th century BC (a phenomenon associable to the Peloponnesian War), one can witness the blossoming of this model in the Greek cities of southern Italy and Sicily, where different styles are distinguishable, among which the Lucanian, the Apulian, the Campanian, or the Sicilian. Figurative topics mainly focus on dramatic and mythological scenes, but also about on daily life.

In Portugal, both collectionism and archaeology obtained a modest number of vases in excellent conditions of preservation¹³. It was through private circumstances that António Bernardo da Costa Cabral (1803-1889), first Marquis of Tomar, ambassador to Rome and a major political figure of the Portuguese Liberalism, became in possession of the vase now in the ownership of Emília Marques Santiago, daughter of one of the authors of this paper.

3. A Nikosthenic vase?

At first glance, the vessel that is referred to integrates a well-documented production. Created at an Athenian workshop and datable from the second half of the 6th century BC, almost all the “Nikosthenic” productions coming from reliable archaeological contexts also reveal an interesting geographical boundary, within the Etruscan area.

From the point of view of manufacturing, the reinterpretation or even pure copy of obvious forms of local *Bucchero* type pottery¹⁴ is significant, thus reflecting both a purely commercial focus on the regional markets, and a clear understanding of local preferences¹⁵. Most of these amphoras come from Cerveteri, as opposed to other

¹¹ Morais 2011, 50-55.

¹² Pereira 2007, 20.

¹³ Pereira 1962; Pereira *et al.*, 2008; Arruda 2007, 135; Ferreira *et al.*, 2008; Morais 2011.

¹⁴ Perkins 2007.

¹⁵ Osborne, 1996.

forms, such as the four hundred small *kyathoi* whose exclusive market seems to have gravitated around Vulci and Orvieto. To put the issue differently, the Nikosthenes workshop in Athens created a specific amphoral form for the Etruscans of ancient Caere, which implies, inherently, an adequate knowledge of local demand, which in this particular case seems to have been almost insatiable for Greek novelties, a phenomenon counting with immediate precedents¹⁶.

About this intriguing dichotomy the issue of directionality emerges, though – that is, the extent to which Etruria dictated the Attic production, instead of subjecting to passive import¹⁷. Moreover, there is the paradox of black figures on Etruscan pottery itself, non-existent before the mid-6th century, whose relationship with Attic imports is also very much unclear, at least in cultural terms¹⁸.

Returning to Nikosthenes' amphoras, this “non-Greek” manufacture has raised academic curiosity for a long time, although one ought to recognize minor changes and sufficient refinement, as opposed to the original basic form, so there is no conceptual reason to deny its validity as an entirely Greek product¹⁹.

Among the remaining estate of Emília Marques Santiago, there is a perfectly conserved vase, which, at first glance, would fit in this production. Its decorative framework corresponds to a relatively common composition. Hermes, messenger of the gods, holding the *kerykeion* and with wings on his feet stands behind Zeus, who sits on an *okladia* in front of an Eileithyia (fig. 1). With very few exceptions, the figurative scenes in Greek pottery in fact refer to mythological environments and when this does not happen, there is a loosely heroic framework, and ritual portrayals such as sacrifices, processions and funerals. Nikosthenic exports in particular, however, often display banal sceneries that would have been appreciated by the Etruscans²⁰, although this feature is not decisive.

¹⁶ Cf. the “Tyrrhenian” group, with recent revaluations; see Sampson 2009.

¹⁷ Osborne 2001, 278.

¹⁸ Paleothodoros 2011.

¹⁹ Eisman, 1974, 43.

²⁰ Boardman 2001, 168; 236.

A first serious reluctance regarding the authenticity of the vase has to do with the transformation of the *theta* in a *tau* or a Latin T, which would be complicated in any case, and the second relates to the absence of a terminal sigma. Additionally, a formulation adding *epoiesen*, that is, “made” (the vessel), very characteristic of this production, although not indispensable, would not have seemed excessive at all. The word NIKOSTENE, written in this way (fig. 2), seems a rudimentary and modern Italianisation of the original Greek anthroponym, which at first glance seems astonishing, given the considerable investment in the creation of the piece.

Nikosthenes, moreover, would have been the only producer/painter who, pointing to the Etruscan market, used his name as a kind of “advertising”²¹, which makes the incoherent spelling even more suspicious. If the female figure on the opposite side actually represents Baucis, fetching a glass of wine for Zeus and Hermes, the incongruity becomes evident, as there is no justification for this Ovidian figure to appear on a Nikosthenic vase.

Without certainties about the piece’s precise route until Portuguese hands, any consideration of its origin would be abusive. The only evidence refers to a period prior to Costa Cabral’s final diplomatic mission in Rome, after the death of Pius IX and the succession of Leo XIII, that is, between 1878 and 1885. Geography and time approach the vase in question to a context emanating from Renaissance antiquarianism, which in fact had brought Greek pottery from the field of curiosity to that of Fine Arts²². It was partly the excitement around the sites of the bay of Naples, affected by the eruption of Vesuvius, which sparked a long process of imitation and pure copying, putting a number of allegedly Greek or Roman artefacts on the market. The 18th century had witnessed great frenzy around the discovery and collection of vases, precisely in Campania, and the publishing of large sets, of which Hamilton, Mazochius and Winckelmann are illus-

²¹ Boardman 2001, 129.

²² Cf. Lyons 2007.

trious precursors²³. This interest had originated a major production of imitations, of which this Nikosthenic vessel may very well be a result. Thermoluminescence dating could fully dismiss any remaining hesitations. In any case, there is no doubt that the piece in question would have been conceived by a specialist, or at least by someone able to interpret Greek and Latinize the name Nikostenes, albeit with a touch of modernism. One should perhaps search some degree of intentionality in this all too apparent inaccuracy.

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²³ Mertens 2010, 20.

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Map: general distribution of Greek pottery found in Portugal.

After Arruda 2007, 137.



Fig. 1: The vase from the Costa Cabral collection.

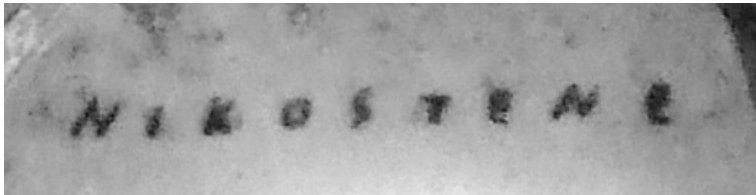


Fig. 2: "NIKOSTENE".